

COMPUTERS/HILLEL SEGAL

Voice mail a low-cost phone mate

As its name suggests, Voice mail is a computerized telephone answering device that helps end the frustrating game of telephone tag.

It combines the basic functions of an ordinary answering machine with many customized features. For example, voice messages can be "broadcast" or sent to all voice mail boxes on the system, or any person's individual box could be called in order to leave a private message.

It's especially good for sales managers trying to communicate with sales people on the road. The manager could place messages in all boxes at the same time, or could send individual messages to each one. Then the salesperson could call back and leave detailed replies in the manager's box, or he could leave orders in an "order box," service requests in a "service box," etc.

Until recently, many buyers

have been deterred by the system's high initial capital costs — typically upwards of \$50,000 for a 14-port system.

Now, smaller systems are being introduced that can handle up to eight simultaneous calls for \$10,000. And one- or two-user systems can be set up on personal computers for under \$2,000.

In addition, there's now an inexpensive way to try out voice-mail features on a trial basis without incurring any equipment costs. It's done by using a local service company that makes its own voice-mail equipment available to other companies.

In Denver I was able to test a system manufactured by Centigram Corp. of San Jose, Calif., called Voice Memo One. It was available from Voice Mail Communications, a division of Alert Telephone Answering Service

(321-3010). They allow you to "time-share" your use of the system much like a computer time-sharing service.

However, there are wide differences between the services provided by different systems. Here are some features to look for:

■ The ability to act as an automatic switchboard, directing calls to proper parties. This is done by the caller pressing numbers on their own telephone in answer to questions asked by the computer. The computerized message might be as simple as, "Thank you for calling the XYZ Widget Company. Please press the extension you wish to reach or wait for assistance."

■ The ability of callers to receive different messages based upon their answers to specific questions asked by the computer. After pressing the selection, the relevant information is given — product information, price quotes, or order-status information.

■ The ability of the system to repeatedly call someone until it gets

through, and then leave a recorded message. Usually, the computer first asks the person answering if he wants to receive the message; and if he touches a specific code, then the message is played.

All, some or none of these features may be available from the local service companies. A low-cost, limited-feature system that simply duplicates an answering machine may cost as little as \$12 per month.

The names and telephone numbers of many local services can be obtained by calling Centigram Corp. at 1-800-942-4942. A wonderful demonstration of a PC-based system is provided free to callers by Natural Microsystems (Natick, Mass.), using their Watson Voice Processing System. You can hear it by dialing 1-800-6-WATSON.

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